

School Health Counseling and Mental Health Support

The area of *Counseling, Psychological and Social Services* is one of the ten components of the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child ([WSCC](#)) model. The CDC defines this component as “prevention and intervention services to support the mental, behavioral, and social-emotional health of students and promote success in the learning process.” Services may be provided in group settings on specific topics (e.g., violence and bullying prevention to a class, support for students who are experiencing family stress), or directed to an individual based on identified need, referral or request.

School nurses, along with other members of student support services, participate in school-based mental health services and collaborate with counselors, social workers and psychologists in serving students and families. The National Association of School Nurses (NASN) has provided a position statement titled “[Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child: Implications for 21st Century School Nurses](#)” (2017) that states that the school nurse plays a supporting role in this component “by collaborating with counseling staff to identify student psychosocial problems and provide input and intervention.”

School Mental Health Supports

Principles related to mental health/psychiatric nursing are a required component of basic nursing education and are integrated into all areas of nursing practice. Schools of nursing are required to provide related clinical and classroom content in “nursing care of individuals with mental health problems” as one of five primary practice areas in preparing graduate nurses for the National Council Licensure Examination. Through practice experience and continuing education, school nurses build on this basic preparation to develop skills and competence in assessment and referral of students with mental health needs in support of the educational process.

While viewed as an important component of the role of the school nurse, each nurse is accountable to determine professional competence and learning needs in all areas of nursing practice. School nurses may meet identified learning needs through related training such as [Youth Mental Health First Aid](#), [Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment](#) (SBIRT), district provided professional development, or other venues that offer continuing education for licensed professionals.

School nurses are members of Student Instructional Support Personnel (SISP) teams in schools and have a role on those teams related to their areas of expertise. Many health conditions encompass both physical and emotional aspects. Students may present with physical complaints that are the result of anxiety and/or depression or are symptomatic of emotional distress. The school nurse should consider engaging the school social worker, counselor, or psychologist when identified issues exceed the nurse’s scope of practice and experience. Some situations are also

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beyond the scope of the school setting and may warrant a referral to an outside community agency following local policy and protocol. School administrators should be notified any time a situation presents a potential safety risk or threat.

The school nurse role in mental health support is locally defined within the parameters of the nursing scope of practice. Mental health support provided through school nurses may include:

- assessment and screening activities related to suicidal ideation, depression or anxiety with referral for those needing related services,
- participation in development of plans for student support and/or school re-entry,
- care coordination for students receiving interventions outside of the school setting, and
- individual and group student health counseling and education in topics related to well-being.

Health Counseling

In nursing, counseling is often labeled “health counseling.” The North Carolina Board of Nursing recognizes counseling as a component of nursing practice for the Registered Nurse, consistent with [G.S. 90-171.20\(7\)g](#). “Teaching and counseling include, but are not limited to: (a) assessing the client’s needs, abilities and knowledge level; (b) adapting teaching content and methods to the identified needs, abilities of the client(s) and knowledge level; (c) evaluating effectiveness of teaching and counseling; and (d) making referrals to appropriate resources” ([21 NCAC 36 .0224](#)).

Health counseling is an important component of the nursing process. School nurses are in a unique position to provide long-term health counseling and problem solving. Best practice recommendations should be utilized in the provision of services. In order to maximize a school nurse’s delivery of health counseling, a nurse should learn and actively practice the skills and strategies that are needed, such as the use of motivational interviewing techniques and skills developed through other health counseling training. Additional resources may be found at the Division of Public Health’s [Adolescent Health Resource Center](#).

Resources

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Mental Health Tools and Resources](#)

[National Association of School Nurses. \(2018\). The school nurse’s role in behavioral/mental health of students \(Position Statement\). Silver Spring, MD: Author.](#)

[National Association of School Nurses Mental Health Resources for School Nurses](#)

[North Carolina School Suicide Prevention Toolkit](#)

Patterson, B. R., Bohnenkamp, J., Hoover, S., Bostic, J., & Selekman, J. (2019). Students with mental/behavioral health concerns and disorders. In J. Selekman, R. A. Shannon, & C. F. Yonkaitis, School Nursing: A Comprehensive Text (Third Edition) (pp. 756-789). Philadelphia: F. A. Davis.